

August, 1995 - Jerome J. Gillen, History

My teaching tip, using parallels/comparisons, is not new. However, with today's students, who believe that the modern era begins when the Beatles landed in New York, the technique has proven very useful. The events historians must describe often seem remote, with little or no relationship to student experiences. I am sure that this circumstance is also true in other disciplines. In history, there is another problem. Historians can present the facts on an issue, but to those who lived these experiences, they were not cold recitations in a safe classroom. To the participants, they represented an existential experience where issues and decisions were made in the midst of powerful emotions and uncertainties. To understand their choices, we must attempt to imagine the atmosphere in which the decisions were made. Parallel examples give students, I believe, a richer appreciation for the lives and decisions of those in the past. Let me give a few examples.

When the Germanic tribes fragmented the Roman Empire in the fourth century, they shattered both a political and an economic system. Empire inhabitants, who had enjoyed the security provided by a large-scale empire and the convenience of a vast trading network, now found themselves dependent on local governments and local wares for survival. Romans, for example, no longer received grain shipments from Sicily and elsewhere, which had allowed the city to exist with a large population. To help students understand the impact of this situation, I have them imagine what it would be like if they woke up tomorrow and all the world but New Jersey had been destroyed. They examine a variety of questions. What would be available to eat? What could they use for fuel? What would they wear? Could New Jersey sustain its present population? What would they do to survive? These were the questions facing the survivors of the old Roman Empire.

In the nineteenth century, the state of Prussia took a series of steps to unite most of Germany under Prussian leadership. The architect of this process was Otto von Bismarck. One of the first obstacles Bismarck and the Prussians faced in their drive for unification was dealing with Austria. For centuries, Austria had been the leading German state. Prussia was considered second in importance. In 1850, Austria humiliated Prussia by forcing its monarch to withdraw his plan to unify Germany or face the Austrian military. The perceived inferiority and humiliation galled the Prussian leadership. Revenge came in 1866. A combination of a reformed Prussian army and Bismarck's political maneuverings resulted in the crushing of the Austrian forces at the Battle of Sadowa. The Prussians were now the number one German state. The generals and the king wanted to give their long-time rivals a taste of defeat and humility. They were primed to march into Vienna. Bismarck stopped them. In doing so, he had to buck powerful emotions. He wanted Austria as a future ally so he offered lenient peace terms. It took all of his skill to persuade the king to accept his view. Since we have few, if any Prussians at Saint Peter's, it is difficult for students to relate

to the Austro-Prussian rivalry in a direct fashion. But most of them have shared a common rivalry. With few exceptions, their high schools have natural rivalries. Some of these have existed for decades. While usually not life and death matters, these rivalries can be intense. The defeat of a dominant power can occasion great emotion. When Saint Anthony's boys basketball team was defeated by Ferris High School a few years ago, there was great celebration a few blocks down Montgomery Street. The rematch required tight security. Even though the events differ in historical significance, the emotions are comparable.

Finally, let me give a twentieth-century example. In totalitarian states, such as Russia under Stalin, information was tightly controlled. Visitors often formed impressions of those states on the information they were fed by their hosts. During the 1930s, this arrangement led to glowing reports on life in the Soviet Union. To create a comparable scenario, I ask students to suppose that they could control the information of visitors to the metropolitan area. They must prove to outsiders how rich we are or how poor we are. They must decide how to bring visitors into the area, where to feed them, where to house them, where to take them to shop, and where to entertain them. The results of this exercise are usually very informative. A certain hamburger chain is most often mentioned as the worst place to eat. Evening students are the best informed on the top restaurants and the most expensive places to shop. Hopefully, the students come away from this activity with a better understanding of how information can be controlled and how people can be deluded.

I hope that these examples will give some indication of the usefulness of this technique. Once again, the purpose is to provide students with a greater awareness of the multi-faceted reality of past human experiences.